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ABSTRACT

The relation of research to politics is described in three stages: (1) securing the contract in response to a request for proposals (RFP) format; (2) conducting the actual field research on site and in a university setting; and (3) securing final sign off on the completed research product. A second purpose of this paper is to compare the conventional use of empirical research language and assumptions of conducting credible research with actual experience in each of the three stages of conduct. A final purpose of this paper is to speculate on what this experience means to each of the six parameters of conducting credible field research by addressing the following six questions: Are state funded research ventures politicized? Does the RFP format guarantee problem focus? How do joint local community-state agency oversight arrangements govern? What are the political expectations for the meaning of feasibility assessment? How are long-standing political feuds and impasses expressed during the conduct of field research? What is the political relationship of the academic researcher to the conduct of field research? (Author/GK)

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THE UTILITY OF POLICY RESEARCH IN THE 1980'S
(Doing Credible Research in a Political Setting)

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The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, to document the relation of research to politics as we experienced it. Three stages will be described: (a) securing the contract in response to an RFP format; (b) conducting the actual field research on site and in a university setting; and (c) securing final sign off on the completed research product. The second purpose is to compare the conventional use of empirical research language and assumptions of conducting credible research with our actual experience in each of the three stages of conduct. And, finally, speculate on what this experience means to each of the six parameters of conducting credible field research by addressing the following six questions: Are state funded research ventures politicized? Does the RFP format guarantee problem focus? How do joint local community-state agency oversite arrangements govern? What are the political expectations for the meaning of feasibility assessment? How are long-standing political feuds and impasses expressed during the conduct of field research? What is the political relationship of the academic researcher to the conduct of field research?

Introduction

The notions of research and politics are conventionally viewed as being distinct, both in their methods and their objectives. Research is characterized by objective, usually scientific, inquiries conducted in a rational, if not, controlled manner. Politics, on the other hand, is characterized by partison competition executed through an unregulated, sometimes irrational, process of social interaction. Research holds as its goal the pursuit of truth, while politics strives for the realization of a solution among competing interests. This absolute distinction between the two notions raises questions as to the degree in which research and politics are compatible.

We say compatible because research has historically been supported by the political system, and is today readily accepted and often desired component of the political process. Traditionally, reseach was assumed to be a process that took place outside of the political arena. Its role in support of the political system was the potential utility of the research findings to political negotiations.

Research performed under this assumption was ascribed credibility by virtue of the degree to which it adhered to the basic tenets for conducting social research. Major considerations were procedural including the proper use of sampling, collection, and analytical techniques. The meaning of credible research and the truth of the findings were for the most part contingent upon the rigor with which the procedural aspects complied with conventional scientific methodological assumptions.

The validity of such assumptions has come under scrutiny

during recent years. One reason has been the questionable validity of research conducted within a political setting. This reason stems from the perceived inapplicability of strict adherence to conventional methodological assumptions. Four issues elaborate this concern: the uniqueness of the times; the various meanings of research utilization and consequent implications for the researcher role; the increase of problem focussed research and its import for control of the research; and the potential political override of research findings not consistent with vested interests. Each of these issues have implications for the meaning and utility of future educational policy research.

The first issue questioning the acceptance of conventional methodological assumptions is the seemingly accepted notion of the uniqueness of the times. The 1970's were a decade of transition and education was not excluded from the turmoil. Declining enrollments and austere fiscal conditions contributed to diminishing expectations for education and "speculation for the 1980's does not hold an automatic promise of better times" (Wiles, 1981). However, even more crucial than whether or not the next decade will produce feast or famine is the inability to make realistic projections of future conditions on which constructive policy decisions can be based. Hudson and Friedman make the point succinctly: "It is not the uncertainty about what things are... but the certainty that current knowledge and today's paradigms will misstate the nature of conditions tommorrow" (Hudson and Friedman, 1974). The value and even meaning of findings and projections based on conventional assumptions of stability and prediction are increasingly suspect.

In a changing society, the assumptions that validate predictions today may not be valid tomorrow, making long-range predictions no longer tenable (Ayres, 1979). An example of just such a case is the seemingly simplified task of population prediction. The U.S. Bureau of the Census uses four series to project total population. In 1967 it predicted that the U.S. population would be between 227 million and 250 million. In 1971 the prediction was revised to be between 225 million and 236 million. The population in 1980 will probably be closer to 221 million, well below the lowest of the four series (Kirst & Garms, 1980). The rapidity of change in our society further diminishes the ability to make reliable projections.

Another change in society contributing to the uniqueness of the times is the phenomenon of decentralization (Naisbitt, 1980). Becoming more pronounced in the 1970's, the diversity of America that we herald as a strength means that a national trend or description may say little or nothing about a particular state, region, or local area. An example of significance to education is the case of enrollment trends where not only do national trends fail to describe the situation in a particular state, but even state trends are averages of dramatic differences across school districts within each state (Odden, 1980). There is a great potential for misrepresentation when only aggregated data is reported. A case in point is research reporting population shifts out of urban areas. Aggregated data may fail to describe the reality of the migration if it only reports numbers of bodies. The shift takes on a different meaning when it is known that the migration is select, predominantly white and middle class, for it

alters the composition of the inner city population. A population that is 80 percent low income and unemployed requires different policy needs than one that is only 40 percent (Kirst and Garms, 1980). Research, if it is to be accurate, can ill afford to overlook the potential misconception that can arise from aggregated data and averages in the pursuit of generalization.

Another aspect of decentralization is the variety of social, political, ideological, legal, economic and religious issues that greatly differentiate values, and subsequent educational needs. The different values that various communities assign to fundamental meanings can greatly affect the choice of what is important to be researched as well as the interpretation of the findings. To research with a priori definitions of value laden concepts has profound implications for the conduct of data collection and analysis of findings. Such a procedure must necessarily restrict the policy options that are potentially derived from findings. Accuracy and credibility must certainly be questioned if fundamental meanings are assigned out of context (Mishler, 1979).

The diversity of decentralization trends is bound to be further confounded when one factors in the unknown consequences of redistribution of resources presently being attempted by the Reagan administration. The proposed redistribution of revenues between federal, state, and local levels, as well as the shift from categorical aid to block grants, carries great potential for redefining policy and the meaning of policy research.

When research methods of aggregating data based on assumptions of ceteris paribus and generalizability intersect

with the diversity and potential uniqueness of reality, a dubious shadow is cast over the validity of the findings. The uniqueness of the times does indeed lend evidence to support the scrutiny that conventional methodologies have recently been under.

The second issue to confront conventional methodological assumptions is the variety of meanings of research utilization in policy formation. Weiss (1978) had identified at least eight different meanings.

TABLE 1

MEANINGS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH UTILIZATION*.

Research for Problem Solving	- provision of evidence or information to aid decision making in the resolution of a problem.
Research Use as a Knowledge-Driven Model	- the results of research uncover an opportunity that can be capitalized upon.
Research Use as an Interactive Model	- research is one part of a complicated process where members of different fields interact in determining policy.
Research Use as Conceptualization	- research serves to sensitize decision makers to new issues or revise the way that a society thinks about issues.
Research as Political Ammunition	- research selectively serves to substantiate a predetermined position already established for reasons of ideology or interest.
Research Use as Manipulation	- research is used in ways that contravene the observer's values, e.g. thought control, brain-washing.
Research Used to Advance Self-Interest	- selfserving uses by both researchers and policy-makers. Some examples follow: to delay action to avoid taking responsibility for a decision to win kudos for a successful program, to gain recognition and approval to discredit an opponent or a disliked policy to maintain the prestige of a government agency through its support of prestigious researchers to keep universities and their social science departments solvent, to support faculty and graduate students to serve as a training ground for apprentice social researchers to generate further research on topics of social importance
A Language of Discourse	- the use of research as a part in the shaping of a social life. To the extent that concepts and theoretical orientations enter the consciousness of educated persons, including decision makers, it shapes our social context.

*From Weiss, 1978, p. 27-34.

Weiss presents the seemingly most comprehensive typology of meaning, while admitting that research utilization is a complicated phenomenon and that any discussion is fraught with conceptual ambiguities (p. 27). In describing the eight meanings, she points out that the typical image of the problem solving use of research faces many conditions that block this type of use in the world of policy. Alternative uses may, therefore, be of prime importance in the consideration of research use in policy. It is interesting to note the inclusion of potential uses that she categorizes as to advance self interest. Although they are ambiguously legitimate, depending on one's values, they cannot be disregarded. Their possible applicability to a politicized setting could have consequences for the meaning of research.

The potential variety of uses to which research may be put burdens the conventional image of research as the representative of truth. This is reinforced, particularly in a political setting, where the conditions that block the problem solving use and shape the research endeavor are in a large part derived from the political sphere in which the research is being conducted (Weiss, 1978). These conditions further impact on the researcher and the problem of defining his/her role. The function of the researcher is not always clear both due to the potential variety of roles and the ambiguity between them. For example, it is clearly possible that a researcher could perceive his/her role as a problem solving agent in pursuit of truth when, in the eyes of the sponsoring agency, his/her role would be perceived as the means of political ammunition. This would imply that the researcher must be politically sensitive and ever alert to changeable

roles if s/he is to wisely manage the research endeavor.

So it is, that the variety of uses that social research may be put to can belie the conventional assumption of research and researcher as the bearers of truth. The varied alternatives for the use of research contribute to the need to examine further the applicability of such assumptions of research, particularly when it is in a political setting.

The third issue is the recent trend toward increased contract research (Gallagher, 1979). Underscoring this trend is the direction toward problem focused research (McElroy, 1977). Contractual arrangements are the primary vehicle for insuring that the focus of a research effort is on the problem desired by the awarding agency. Two concerns stand out when examining the implications of contract research. First, it is an indicator of the larger society's support of research expressed through the availability of funds. When resources for conducting research are plentiful, there is the opportunity to support multiple and varying efforts. During conditions of austerity, there is a renewed call for accountability which loosely translates to improved visibility for the utility of research efforts -- the more immediate and directly appliable research findings are, the greater the perceived utility and justification of moneys expended. By contractual arrangements, funding agencies can more precisely establish the research agenda creating greater assurance that their research funds will be well accounted for.

The second concern is control. Funding agencies desire varying degrees of control over the research endeavor depending

on the nature of the problem to be studied. Gallagher (1979) has indicated how different strategies for administering research can meet differing research goals. He suggests that three strategies employing varying degrees of control to the awarding agency be used to meet the differing needs of various research program goals.

TABLE 2

RESEARCH USE VS. RESEARCH STRATEGY*

Research Program Goals	Research Strategy	
	Primary	Secondary
Product Development Instrument Development	RFP RFA	RFP
Theory Generation	OG	RFA
Surveys Program Evaluation	RFP RFP	RFA RFA
Theory Test and Application	OG	RFA

OG - Open Grant
The awarding agency announces the availability of research funds, while the area of research, statement of the problem, and methodology are the province of the researcher.

RFA - Request for Application
The awarding agency makes a special announcement which identifies a priority area and the investigator designs the study and determines the questions addressed.

RFP - Request for Proposal
The nature of the problem to be studied or task to be completed is determined by the agency and the responding scientist must fit investigation or activity within predetermined boundaries which often include specific population to be used, methods to be utilized, etc.

*From Gallagher, 1979, p. 35.

The Open Grant (OG) strategy affords the least control. It usually identifies a problem area, but leaves the what and how of

the specific research to the researcher. The Request for Application (RFA) strategy increases the control of the funding agency by specifying what is to be studied and possibly defining the parameters within which the research must be conducted. The final strategy, Request for Proposal (RFP), affords the most control. Usually an RFP will specify what is to be studied and how it will be studied. RFP's vary, but it is not unheard of to have the funding agency dictate the exact methodology, even to the sample size, that must be employed in the research.

The concern of control is significant for the conventional assumption of research. Research, to be objective, is predicated on the researcher's freedom to investigate without external parameters and/or criteria being imposed. The greater the control imposed by the awarding agency, the greater the restrictions for the researcher to employ conventional empirical assumptions to the formulation and conduct of the research. Further, more often than not, an awarding agency imposing control will be seeking research to address a social problem of specific consequence to them. In this case, the problem will be politically identified and the utility of the research will be evaluated by its political expedience. To insure political utility, the awarding agency must establish the parameters for conducting the research. The imposition of politically determined parameters may be incongruent with the tenets of objectively designed research. This, in turn, questions the objectivity of any findings obtained in politically defined research methodologies. The amount of control relegated to the researcher for formulation and conduct of of the research has great implications for the conduct of credible

social research in a political setting.

The final issue impinging on the applicability of conventional methodological assumptions is the potential for the political override of research when the findings are in discord with vested interests. The case of the 1960's Coleman Report demonstrates this well. Contracted by the Federal Government to evaluate the effects of Great Society programs in education, Coleman found that the programs were of little value. In his finding of the truth, Coleman had undermined the prevalent ideology that was the moving force of the Great Society. Due to the political unacceptability of the findings, the research was subjected to intensive scrutiny and, as Weiss (1976) states, "A first line of attack is the study's methodology. Critics of every persuasion seem able to locate experts who find flaws in the procedures of the research process even though their real criticisms derive less from methodology than from ideology."

Under conventional research assumptions, the methodology is the basis for designing the research to insure truth. Adherence to methodological rudiments is the measure of the validity of the findings and the ultimate credibility of the research. One may assume that had the findings of the Coleman Report been more coincident with the dominant ideology of the times, the process used would have become mere academic chaff. The findings, then, became the determinant for procedural retrospection. The subtle shift in intent of the methodological debate has implications not only for the potential utility of research, but also the criteria for judging credibility when research is conducted in a political setting.

The fact that conventional methodological assumptions emphasize scientific procedural aspects to the disregard of political realities has great implications for research if its utility for policy is a concern. Findings that are not congruent with vested interests are likely to be dismissed from consideration by policy makers. In fact, there is evidence that suggests research which challenges existing policies or prevailing orthodoxies runs the risk of being suppressed (Brittel, 1981). The notion that conventional research assumptions need not address political concerns is in need of review if the research is to address political interests.

All of the four issues presented raise questions about the appropriateness of conventional research assumptions. Moreover, they suggest that traditional scientific precepts of research may not adequately attend to the requirements of conducting social research in a political setting. It would seem that the credibility of research in a political setting does not rest alone on its adherence to conventional methodological assumption, but is at best in part dependent on its fit to the political environment. The failure of conventional sssumptions to address the politics suggests that the importance of knowing more about what the actual politics look like as they influence the research effort is an important methodological consideration.

Our own experience in conducting contract research affords a great opportunity to explore the implications of conducting research in a political setting. Our experience was conducted under the following parameters: (a) state funded; (b) RFP specified; (c) joint community-SEA oversite; (d) feasibility; (e)

political demand for specific recommendations and actions to be taken on a long-standing, unresolved issue; and (f) the use of an out-of-state university as prime contractor. All six parameters of this research endeavor have possible implications for the meaning of doing credible research.

Moreover, this experience is representative of the type of research that should affect more and more of the research community in the coming years. The existing trend to contract research will only be intensified as regulations and resource allocation power centralize at state level (as President Reagan has indicated). For these reasons, we feel this experience is not merely a description of conducting contractual field research, but a documentation of some potentially crucial methodological issues for actually doing social research in the 1980's.

Background

Our research experience was based in two counties of a northeastern state during Spring of 1980. The setting was relatively rural, with the accompanying conditions of sparse population, languishing economy and virtually no mass transportation system. As the state was apportioned, the counties were the only two without state community colleges; residents who wished to attend courses at two-year post-secondary schools were forced to use either those state community colleges in neighboring counties or the private institutions of higher education in their area. The counties then paid a chargeback fee to the neighboring schools to defray the tuition costs for nonresidents.

As the importance to the citizenry of advanced training increased during the late 1960's and into the 1970's, so did the chargeback costs. County officials began to question the wisdom of channeling funds into other counties when money was needed "at home." Furthermore, businessmen were interested in attracting new residents to the area to compensate for the declining agricultural industry. The county officials reasoned that if the counties had their own community college, it would not only diminish the chargebacks, but also act as a drawing card for future investors and residents.

Obviously, the optimal solution would be for each county to develop its own two-year school. Due to population size, however, state regulations required both counties to form one area if, indeed, such educational services were to be established. The governing State Educational Agency (SEA) further required a formal indication of need based on the counties' ability to support such

services financially and demographically.

During the decade prior to our study, the two counties engaged in several studies designed to provide this evidence to the SEA. Feelings of distrust erupted between the counties and the SEA and the counties themselves. The counties claimed the SEA was changing its requirements to their detriment. The SEA did not see clear evidence to support new community college services in this area. County A charged that it was ready to move ahead in creating the services, but County B was dragging its feet. County B did not believe County A should administer the program alone. Round and round the arguments went, resulting in no resolution. Finally, based on their greater distrust of the SEA than of each other, the two counties decided to jointly sponsor a new study to determine the feasibility of community college services. To insure objectivity, the study would be contracted out to a neutral party to be selected by the counties and the SEA from the respondents to a request for proposal (RFP).

Securing the Contract

The RFP was released in the fall of 1979. A SUNYA faculty member acquired knowledge of it and suggested it as an excellent project for doctoral students in Educational Administration and Policy Studies. The students saw this as a prime opportunity to combine theory and practice, as well as fulfill requirements for the Community Analysis course. We began to draft a proposal.

It wasn't long before several research questions surfaced. The RFP asked, in effect, to predict the economic, demographic,

and educational conditions for the two counties over the next decade. Traditional trend analyses techniques could be applied, but would this produce an accurate prediction? Given the events of the last decade and the inability to forecast the extent to which they occurred, is any attempt to predict the future sensible and justified? In our collective opinion, the RFP request for the collection of straightforward statistical data would provide information on only a limited basis. Glaringly missing were concerns for resource scarcities and the needs and concerns of the local citizenry. Our proposal attempted to expand the methodological procedures to combine intensive interviewing with statistical data to provide as realistic a picture as possible. Central to the proposed methodology was the assumption of a close and continuous relationship between the research team and the State/Two County Steering Committee. Equally central was the concept that no a priori assumptions of relationships and applications existed between the characteristics reflected in primary source data and the needs of individuals expressed through interviews.

The Steering Committee was either intrigued by our proposed methodology or enticed by our estimated budget (approximately $7,000 below the maximum allocation). They invited us to come for an interview during the first week of January, 1980. Our six other competitors were all professional consulting firms. As we anticipated, questions arose regarding the sample size of interviewees and the validity of such results.

The county representatives seemed impressed that we would actually be talking to community notables, but raised several other issues including the number of hours to be spent

on site in the conduct of the study; the capability of the researchers, primarily with regard to age and field experience; and the potential emphasis on theory and academics (the ivory tower mentality) over the implementation of ideas in the "real world." The SEA challenged the "professionalism" of our group and the rather unorthodox (in their opinion) means by which we would gather our information.

The January deadline date arrived and no award was made. We were, however, notified that we were still among three groups being considered. To insure continued consideration, the Steering Committee requested to review resumes from all doctoral students to be involved. We complied.

After an additional two weeks, we inquired of the status of the contract. We were told by the SEA that, should we consent to the addition of a consultant of their choosing, the contract would be ours. The suggested consultant also happened to be the primary consultant on the other two proposals still under consideration. This was unacceptable to us and we decided to withdraw our proposal.

Our next contact came from a county representative who requested that we reconsider. He indicated that other county representatives had asked their state legislator to inquire why the contract had not been awarded. Furthermore, he wanted us to know that the county people were indeed operating in "good faith."

Shortly thereafter, the SEA notified us that we could have the contract if we obtained the services of an additional consultant of our choosing. We deliberated, consented, and were awarded the contract approximately one month after the original

deadline. We later learned that the delay was the result of the SEA and the two counties not being able to reach agreement on a proposal. Given the doubts and questions expressed by the SEA, and their subsequent demands of our group, it would appear that the SEA was our biggest obstacle in obtaining this grant. However, it may be just this disapproval that caused the counties to favor our group over the other firms sanctioned by the SEA.

Conducting the Study

The study was conducted during March and April, 1980. Almost from its inception, we could see that several concepts of research were in operation. The counties viewed our efforts as definitively vindicating their position that a community college was necessary. In fact, committee members told us that they already knew what they wanted and indirectly indicated that we should provide the means to get it. By conducting the study on site, interviewing local citizenry, and receiving publicity through the press, we were, in effect, generating the moral support of the residents which the county representatives hoped would result in fiscal support as well. This perception of research did not exactly parallel our view of entering the contract without *a priori* assumptions. Repeatedly we emphasized that we would report what we found, not what we (or they) wanted to find.

The SEA also knew what it wanted -- no new construction of a college was to take place. The findings of the previous studies had supported this position; consequently, the SEA saw no reason to encourage a new study, especially one that included some expression of public opinion. The new study may, after all,

support the counties' proposed plans or, even worse, create a desire on the part of the residents. Therefore, data to be supplied by the SEA were either extracted after frequent requests or unavailable.

Most significantly, our own conceptions of research were altered by our experience in the field. Academic training and methodologies pointed to the collection and analysis of data, both qualitative and quantitative, to achieve an overview, an average, an aggregate. Our experience in this study belied this ability. The two counties could not be equalized into a unified area for the purposes of establishing a community college. Distinct differences became evident regarding types of services required, transportation, constituent support, population density, etc. not only between the two counties, but within each county itself. As we examined the data, the two-county area divided itself, based on geographic, economic and demographic conditions, into three areas which crossed existing county lines. Citizen needs and desired courses of study further differentiated the areas. Small-scale research took on the added meaning of planning for a specific area based on its uniqueness and separateness from even neighboring communities rather than an attempt at equalization.

The process itself became important. As previously mentioned, the publicity surrounding our site visits generated much interest in the feasibility study and the idea for community college services on the part of the residents. We were, if nothing else, highly visible. The opinions of the people were solicited, to be transferred to the Committee and governing bodies.

Thus, the Committee was viewed as active and responsive to the constituents. Residents discussed the question of post-secondary services among themselves and sought information regarding the study from us. Members of our research group were invited to speak at Kiwanis meetings, interviewed on radio talk shows, and requested to submit periodic press releases to local newspapers. Regardless of the outcome, the mere conduct of the study indicated that this was, indeed, a vital area able to take the initiative during a period of economic uncertainty. It provided the Committee and citizenry with something of substance, something tangible to hang onto when most of the "predictable" societal underpinnings (politics, economics, social mores) had turned to quicksand.

In this sense, the conduct of the study, irrespective of the final report, exemplified still another unexpected meaning of research -- the satisfaction of an unnerved community's need for rationality, stability, and predictability in a decade which provides none of these. In essence, this research process, on a small scale, served the community's "need to know".

Concluding the Study

The findings of the study yielded the following conclusions:

1. There is a general need to improve the coordination of all post-secondary services in both A and B counties.

2. Curriculum planning should be based upon area consideration of educational needs and service delivery possibilities.

3. All types of curriculum should be considered in

determining the meaning of optimum patterns of service and delivery of post-secondary education.

4. The need for improved community college services is more an issue of resolving the coordination of existing curricular services than providing for increased curricular services.

5. There exists a great need for a management information system capable of documenting the existing flow of students, academic credits and dollars.

6. There exists a great need for increased articulation between professionals providing post-secondary educational services, citizens interested in educational opportunity and officials of county and state governments.

Subsequent recommendations were made. As we had indicated in our proposal, we saw no validity or accuracy in forecasting the political, economic and social conditions of 1990 and our report did not contain such predictions. Likewise, implementation strategies were also omitted on the premise that no one plan would be effective for the entire two-county area.

As theater critics would say, the final report played to mixed reviews. The Committee was understandably happy that the study was completed within both the budgeting and temporal constraints. But their collective "need to know" was frustrated by our declaration of inability to predict the conditions of the next decade and our lack of specific plans to implement the recommendations. Allegations of nonfulfillment of contract were made. The SEA representatives, chagrined by the lack of coordination and

management of existing services (as stated in the final report), became defensive and hostile when realizing that the final policy decisions remained with their agency. The counties seemed perplexed. They did not get what they wanted -- a course of action ready to present to the SEA and taxpayers -- but they also did not really know how to go about getting such information. To assuage all parties involved, fifteen additional days were granted during which time an addendum was prepared. It addressed once more the basic research issue of the inability to prescribe one generalized strategy for an area with diverse internal needs and a paucity of supporting evidence. It iterated the fallacy of predicting the future based on present assumptions and held that to do so with the existing data would violate subsequent ethical concerns for the researchers.

The contract was finally completed in mid-June 1980, approximately eight months after our initial response to the RFP.

The Use of Empirical Research Language and Assumptions

Essential to the conduct of our study were the methodological issues of sample size, ability to project for the next decade, and the constitution of "accuracy." Their importance was evident from our response to the RFP. Our proposal spoke to the inability to address growing uncertainty and instability by merely applying systematic practices of demonstrated value. By utilizing the "open box technique" (Haas and Drabek, 1973), we hoped to determine a system of relationships between all the variables -- including primary source data and citizen opinion -- and the feasibility of community college services. This technique allows

the researcher to modify initial assumptions as the study progresses and allows the data to uncover new or existing relationships. It is this "grounded theory" approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which negates the static, standard methodology's need for a priori assumptions. In essence, the study of changing conditions necessitates the use of flexible techniques.

As we see it, the concepts of sample size and ability to predict are subsets of the larger issue of what constitutes an accurate description. The "accuracy" of the findings based on interview results would not necessarily improve with the inclusion of a substantially greater number of interviewers. Furthermore, it would not be enhanced by representative selection based on random techniques of stratification, cluster/area-probability or quota sampling (Pelto and Pelto, 1978) for the same reasons. Many of the community members interviewed were either local government officials, business owners, educators, or, in some fashion, active in the community. In essence, they were in positions through which they would acquire greater information and knowledge pertinent to the feasibility of establishing post-secondary educational services in these two counties. To increase the sample size to include more general public opinion would not result in substantially more knowledge. Identification of "key actors" (Hunter, 1953) offers a representative sample able to provide crucial insights into the needs of the region, especially when costs and time are important factors (as they are for much research done on a small scale). The value of the "elite interview" (Dexter, 1970) was also apparent throughout the conduct of the study as we revised our initial interview questions based on

information and interpretations offered by our identified population.

A particularly thorny problem for us was the Committee's request for a ten-year projection as part of the study's focus. Besides the interviewing of local citizenry, our research group collected data from census reports, county and city records, labor statistics, and so forth to obtain the necessary demographic, economic, and educational characteristics of the area. However, in reviewing these data and the traditionally applied statistical methods and trend analysis techniques, we arrived at a disenheartening (especially for the Committee) conclusion. No realistic or accurate projection of the next decade could be made using the present or the past five years as an indicator.

To elaborate further, consider one factor essential to the development and success of educational services in this rural area -- the cost of energy and fuel. Students attending classes would, given current conditions, rely on private transportation to commute to whatever locations were designated as community college sites. The establishment of a mass transit system would incur great expense for these two counties. The latter half of the 1970's saw single twelve-month periods in which the cost of gasoline and oil doubled. The rapid rise in prices caused far-reaching repercussions -- the extension of daylight saving time, the decline of the American auto industry, increased interest in alternative forms of energy. With the information available to us in the early 1970's, could researchers have accurately predicted the dramatic turn of events which occurred by the late 1970's? Certainly, one would assume that if this could have been

done, the United States would have been better prepared for the shift in oil prices by the Arab nations.

All this is to say that, if the researcher is striving for accuracy and realistic planning, the extent of change and the interrelationships between components of modern life defy precise forecasting, particularly for a ten-year period. Such activity may provide a "security blanket" for the contractors, but raises questions about the integrity of the research report. The most research could -- and perhaps should -- provide is a description or recommendation of contingency plans to mitigate against "obsolete data" in the event of dramatic change. It also appears that small scale research, affecting a limited region, is the optimal manner from which accurate planning can evolve. Since it relates to a specific area, small scale research can use data that are pertinent to the conditions of that area, thereby avoiding the fallacy of reducing information from a variety of regions to create a "national average" which is not only inaccurate, but inapplicable.

Sample size and forecasting ability were the two biggest questions raised during the securing and conduct of this study. They typify the more encompassing issue of what constitutes accuracy in research design and analysis. For our study, the primary source data supplied quantitative information to develop a comprehensive index of the counties' condition. The general categories of indicators used to guide our collection included demography, economic base, employment opportunity, personal income distribution, transportation, public service delivery, and education. It was our contention, however, that the application of standard statis-

tical techniques (stepwise regression analysis) to determine the relative importance of conventional demographic indices in profiling the geographic units under consideration would result in merely the aggregation of quantifiable data, to the exclusion of "unmeasurable" information. We felt that a complete picture of the area under study would be achieved only through the amalgamation of both quantitative and qualitative data. Our intent was twofold: (1) to provide as accurate a description as possible within the given constraints; and (2) to strengthen our findings and conclusions through support from data collected by various means (Haas and Drabek, 1973).

Once the decision was made to use field data, other questions became important. Who should be interviewed? What topics/subtopics should be considered? Which questions should be asked and what answers were important? Were some responses more "valid" than others?

If we were to adhere strictly to the RFP and empirical assumptions, the answers to these questions may have been easier. Our task would be to use research in an instrumental fashion (Weiss, 1978) to determine the feasibility for community college services in these two counties. Our data would be limited to selected indicators, and chosen empirical controls would be imposed on the conduct of the study to approximate a scientific approach. As we have indicated, however, our dissatisfaction with the ability of empirical research assumptions to describe and predict "reality" propelled us to use a technique that would be flexible to revision as interrelationships among variables surfaced. Our choice to relinquish a certain degree of control

over the content of the data was compensated for by this increased awareness. Through our identification of "key actors" (the "who"), we gained insight into answering the subsequent questions of "what" and "which." This redefinition of the problem under study through the use of the "elite interview" comes closer to Weiss' idea of conceptualization. In effect, we were clarifying and revising the problem for the Committee with their assistance.

Finally, although we have interpreted accuracy to mean a precise description of existing conditions, the term has another meaning that is of special interest to the researcher. To be accurate is to adhere closely to a standard. The researcher, through years of training and work in his/her chosen field, has intrinsic and extrinsic standards which guide any study and analysis of data. Consequently, the conduct of the study and the final report must meet these standards if the research is to be judged credible, and the researcher reputable. This can be difficult while doing small scale research for a number of reasons. The researcher becomes intimately involved in the politics of the region, at least for the duration of the study. While this is necessary and even advantageous for data collection, the trade-off to the researcher may be the loss or suspension of objectivity and neutrality. S/he must be aware of the tendency to reflect particular perspectives held by various interest groups in the final report and recommendations; if this is done, it must be a choice consciously made. In addition, s/he may frequently find, as we did, essential data either incomplete or nonexistent due to poor local record keeping. One must resist the temptation of going beyond the existing information or "fudging" the data when

reporting findings and drawing conclusions in an attempt to fulfill the requirements of the contract. This became a real concern for us during our experience and it is not inconceivable that it would be for other small scale studies as well.

Speculation on Crucial Methodological Questions

Our experience in this study is a descriptive case under the following parameters: (a) state-funded; (b) RFP specified; (c) joint local-SEA control and interest; (d) the meaning of feasibility assessment: (3) political demand for specific recommendations; (f) the political relationship of an academic research team to the conduct of field research. All six characteristics have possible implications for the meaning of doing credible research within a political setting.

Using the stated parameters as guides, several questions regarding field research may be formulated. While our responses are grounded in our experiences conducting this feasibility study, we believe others involved in similar endeavors may appreciate our extrapolations and find them transferable.

(a) Are state funded research ventures politicized?

Because of the existence of several competing interests -- in our case, the SEA and members of both counties -- the answer must be in the affirmative. Competition among interest groups centers around the acquisition of scarce resources -- usually money -- and control over subsequent allocations. It may also, as in our case, focus on control of both the conduct of the research and its findings. Researchers attempting credible field research in such politicized arenas must acknowledge this existence

and realize that it will affect most, if not all, aspects of their study. As Scott and Shore have pointed out, "social scientists show no shortage of awareness of the influence of partisan politics; at the same time, there is a tendency to dismiss this influence as a temporary problem that will disappear as scientists expand their knowledge...about the problem" (Scott and Shore, 1979). The credibility of the research may depend on the researcher's ability to employ a political perspective in the conduct of the research.

(b) Does the RFP format guarantee "problem focus"?

Yes, if the study is to be conducted under the traditional empirical assumptions of controlled data collection and testing of a priori hypotheses. This does not typify field research in a politicized arena. As we have noted, the problem stated in the RFP was only the tip of the iceberg. The political relationships among the interested parties shape and define the policy issues involved. Since such relationships unfold during the conduct of the research, no a priori assumptions can be made if credibility and accuracy are the researcher's goals. Succinctly put, politics shape the research and research helps clarify and define the policy issues for the contractors (Lynn, 1978). Therefore, problem focus of research cannot be guaranteed by the RFP.

(c) How do joint local community-state agency oversite arrangements govern?

The key word here is "joint." Even if both state and community governing bodies have an interest in the issue at hand, it was not our experience that "joint" meant "coequal." Political control and governance shifted from one agency to another as the

competition for control increased among the parties. As could be expected from sociological literature concerning triads, a coalition ultimately formed between Counties A and B against the third party, the SEA (Simmel, 1950). Initially, the SEA was dominant as they provided the machinery for releasing the RFP. In choosing the proposal, this control was contested with the county coalition gaining dominance. Once the contract was awarded, control of the research was predominantly in the hands of the researcher. However, it was county representatives that served as the primary officials with whom we coordinated and worked. It was only at the conclusion of the study that the SEA reasserted itself. As the initiator of allegations, they asserted their claim to the research product and assumably dominant interest in determination of its utility. The changing governance arrangements were important aspects of the political arena and crucial to the ultimate utility of the research effort.

(d) What are the political expectations for the meaning of "feasibility assessment"?

The conduct of a feasibility assessment appears to satisfy two purposes for the contractors and constituents. First, it is expected to provide information about the future to facilitate planning. As we have experienced, however, the inability of traditional assessment techniques to accurately predict during times of dramatic change frustrates this community "need to know" and can create problems for the researcher at the conclusion of the contract. Secondly, the governing agencies view such assessments as a means of justifying the allocation of resources. By employing neutral researchers to conduct an objective study,

interested officials can present, to either constituents or other political agencies, rationally derived evidence to support or negate the proposed plan of action. Both of these purposes have implications for the researcher in the conduct of a study. Acknowledging the political influences that shape research, the researcher must establish an ideological perspective that will allow him/her to define the utility of the proposed effort. Then a conscious plan of action can be initiated and adapted to maximize the use of the research in view of the political conditions.

(e) How are long-standing political feuds and impasses expressed during the conduct of field research?

Primarily, political feuds and impasses are expressed through competition between and among members of the governing agencies. Each side contains special interest groups championing their respective issues. The competition is manifested through the various attempts made by politicos to control data collection to include or exclude information to result in a final report favorable to their own interest. As could be anticipated, the level of cooperation and support received from members of the respective interest groups varies according to their perceptions of the study's direction and outcome.

(f) What is the political relationship of the academic researcher to the conduct of field research?

For all intents and purposes, the researcher becomes a participant in the political process. S/he acts as a translator for the policy makers by helping them define the issues and problems in more specific terms to determine existing conditions, long-range goals, and steps to take along the way. The researcher

further assists policy makers by designing suitable methodologies which will secure the appropriate data necessary to address the policy issue in question. In addition, the researcher lends rationality and legitimacy to the decision maker and the decision making process, by producing "factual" evidence via his/her perceived neutrality in a visible information gathering process.

Beyond these six parameters are several other implications for the conduct of social research during the next decade. The recently proposed decentralization of resource allocations and budgetary controls could signal an increase in the use of small scale contract research to resolve local and regional policy issues, possibly resulting in more accurate, area-specific implementation strategies. This is directly related to the problems inherent in data aggregation versus the ability to accurately describe existing conditions. By definition, aggregation necessitates the summation of data to arrive at "the big picture." The amassing of information about this entire country, however, does little to account for regional, state, or local differences, nor does it assist in planning for such variations. In a way, it allows us to miss the trees for the forest.

Small scale research, by its limited geographic scope, can help to remedy this problem. It can provide information and suggest recommendations that are tailored to the individualized needs of various locales. Furthermore, as "needs" are perceived by communities, small scale research can bridge the gap between the objective, "hard" data (e.g., economic statistics for a community), and the subjective expressed desires of the citizenry (e.g., wish for expanded post-secondary educational services) by

involving the community in the decision making process.

Perhaps the real issue for the researchers is what approximates "reality" or "accuracy." We would like to posit that the true reflection of reality may lie in describing, as completely and multifacetedly as possible, the single instance or case study.

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